



Jean Repath's story of

Gwendolyn



“Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, hold the horse ’til I get on...”
(Mom’s chant one day, at age 56, during a particularly intense episode)

1919: Gwendolyn was born in Brandon, Manitoba, youngest of eight children.

- Her mother was 45, didn’t want another baby, and so didn’t speak to her husband for two years.
- Mom’s father traveled a lot selling farm machinery.

1924: Age 5: Mom’s next-oldest sister died of polio.

- Photos show Mom as pretty with long ringlets, chiffon dresses.
- Studied piano eventually completing grade ten at the Royal Conservatory.

1929: Age 10: Mom’s siblings lived at home until they married contributing their wages to the family.

- Mom did well in school.
- Recognized for her lovely singing voice, Mom sang in churches, in a glee club, at weddings and with a group on CBC radio.

1940: Age 21: Worked as secretary to the Editor of the Hudson Bay Company magazine The Beaver using her excellent spelling, typing and shorthand skills.

- Sang the part of Princess Zara in a production of Utopia Limited at the University of Manitoba. My father was studying medicine there. He saw the performance and wanted to meet her. Mom’s brother introduced them.

1943: Age 24: Mom and Dad look happy in their wedding photos – he in his army uniform, she in a stylish suit.

- Dad’s medical class graduation was accelerated because of the war.
- Dad was stationed in Regina doing medical exams on troops.
- First child born – a girl. At that time it was considered “modern” to use pain deadening drugs during childbirth. Mom chose natural childbirth.

1944: Dad went overseas, working as a surgeon in field hospitals.

- Mom (and daughter) stayed with Mom’s sister in Winnipeg.

1947: Dad returned from Europe and the family moved to Flin Flon, Manitoba, population 14,000, where he began a career as a general physician.

- I was born.
- We lived in a “company cottage” next to the Hudson Bay Mining and Smelting Company’s mine site.
- The nine doctors and their families would socialize. Dad was very popular; Mom was quite reserved.
- Doing chores at home she would wear pretty dresses (with an apron), high heels, and sing show tunes and folk songs.

- Dad's father was a friendly man but died when we were young. Dad's mother gave the impression that no one was "good enough" for her son and her visits were tense.

1949: Child number three – the first son was born.

- Summers were spent at our cabin at a northern lake (no electricity or running water; wood stove; ice box; outhouse). Sometimes Dad would drive us to the lake and go back to work in Flin Flon, so Mom was alone with three children but she seemed really happy there.

1950: Age: 30: The family moved to "Willowvale" (a suburb of Flin Flon) owning a house upwind of the mine's smelter smoke.

- Mom loved to play popular songs on our piano. We enjoyed singing along with her. She also played classical music with great expression.
- Mom never drove so she was dependent on Dad who was very busy being a doctor. As children we played freely outside all day, returning for meals and bedtime. Family fun involved frequent gatherings with my Dad's colleagues and their families.
- Mom dearly loved going to medical conventions each year – New York, Chicago, Banff, etc. She loved shopping and sightseeing, bringing home wonderful presents for us.

1951: Child number four was born. He weighed more than ten pounds and the doctor didn't realize he was breech. The attending nurse ignored Mom's sense that "something was wrong". In trying to turn him, they broke his arm. His cord was around his neck and brain damage occurred.

- In those days problems with child development were somehow perceived to be the fault of the mother.
- He was a happy child but needed constant watching. He once wandered miles away from our fenced back yard into the bush. Hours later a search party, led by the RCMP, found him sleeping in a meadow.

1953: Age 34: Mom had her first "breakdown". One snowy night she heard noises and thought someone was trying to break in. Since Dad was out of town, Mom called the police and they found us all bundled in snowsuits, crouching inside the front door. We (the kids) got to ride in a police car and spent the night in a hotel in town. Mom "went away" for a while and a housekeeper moved in until Mom was ready to come home.

- Dad (as a doctor) prescribed various medications for Mom's symptoms. Years later she blamed some of her problems on the medications.
- Mom also drank alcohol. When she had breakdowns, she would talk to herself, day and night, in a stream of consciousness. "Hitler should have been strangled at birth!" was one of her passionate statements.
- No one mentioned the word schizophrenia.
- Dad started to show symptoms of multiple sclerosis.

1955: A decision was made to put child number four (age four) into an institution for "retarded" children in Portage La Prairie, Manitoba. Mom never talked about him again.

- She soon discovered that she was pregnant.

1956: We moved to Winnipeg, so that Dad could do an internship in radiology. It would be easier on his health than being a GP.

- Child number five (a girl) was born. Mom's labour was induced early because of her history of large babies. Dad was visiting Mom in the hospital when her contractions began and he "caught" his daughter.

1958: We moved to Richmond, B.C. hoping the temperate climate would be easier on Dad's health.

- Dad began a residency in anesthesiology at Vancouver General Hospital. His MS symptoms became more extreme. He had to give up driving.
- My older sister learned to drive to help with shopping and appointments.

1959: Dad retired at age 40.

- Mom's breakdowns happened more frequently mostly in spring and early summer.
- Mom believed that the fillings in her teeth were transmitting her thoughts to my Dad's former friends and colleagues.
- She would stop taking her medications believing they were part of the conspiracy.
- She was sent to Riverview and Crease Clinic for treatments including ECT which she hated.
- At first we stayed with relatives when Mom went away. Later housekeepers were hired.
- In high school I spent time in a foster home.
- There was great relief when Mom came home. She never mentioned her breakdowns when she was back to "normal".
- Mom was an excellent cook and preferred to prepare big family dinners by herself.

1960: Dad's MS progressed rapidly. He became bedridden. Support workers came in to help with his physical needs. It was a hard time for Mom, because she had needs of her own.

1961: Dad was transferred into extended care – in the Veterans' Wing of Shaughnessy Hospital. He lost his ability to speak so communication was difficult.

- Every weekend Mom would take my five-year-old sister on the bus to visit Dad in the hospital. We all visited him there as often as we could.
- Mom's breakdowns were now treated at the UBC Psychiatric Centre – an extreme improvement. Medications improved and had fewer side effects.

1967: Age 48: Dad died of pneumonia. He was 47. My younger sister was ten, my brother was seventeen; I was nineteen; my older sister was 22.

- By Dad's good planning Mom was financially secure.
- Mom bought a new family car which my brother and I drove for errands.
- She was very generous with material things and with her time and her home.

1971: The first of seven grandchildren was born. The grandchildren called her "Nana." She was welcoming and generous with them and they loved visiting her.

1972: My older sister was welcomed back home when her first marriage ended.

- Mom took her meds and things went reasonably well if everyone ignored her drinking. She would have “Dial-a Bottle” deliver alcohol.

1974: Age 55: Breakdowns continued – some were quite bizarre and public. We could tell when a breakdown was imminent but there needed to be a crisis before police or hospital authorities could intervene. During such crises ambulances and/or RCMP officers would transport Mom to the UBC Psych ward where she would stay until her medications brought her back to “normal”.

- During one such crisis I was driving Mom to the hospital when she grabbed the wheel, forcing me to stop. She then leaped out of my car, ran into traffic and stopped a stranger to ask him to drive her to the police station, because Richmond was going to blow up. She thought the bomb was attached to her. Thankfully, the stranger did as she asked. I followed them to the station. Mom was hospitalized, put back on her meds and, after some time at UBC, she was fine again.

1976: Mom welcomed my brother with his wife and two young sons back home while they were waiting to move into their own house.

1981: Mom welcomed me and my children home without question when I left my husband. I was about to give birth to my third daughter. We stayed for over a year.

- The breakdowns continued. Once Mom threatened to kill me. I knew she didn’t mean it, but it was confusing for my children to witness their Nana in such a state.
- My children and I moved out but we visited each weekend.

1988- 1996: Ages 69-77: More stable years with fewer breakdowns.

- Through her life Mom had many addictions: alcohol, cigarettes, shopping, sweets, non-prescription medications. The television was always on.
- She read People magazine and newspapers and kept track of world events. She liked to talk about the lives of famous people.
- She stopped playing the piano and singing but loved listening to records – Nana Mouskouri, Paul Robson, The Band, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Neil Diamond, etc.
- Mom suffered a series of medical conditions: osteoporosis, a broken hip, spinal surgery, polyps in her colon, heart problems and several bouts of pneumonia. Many family vigils were held when doctors thought she was about to die but she always recovered.
- She had a series of small TIA strokes but managed to stay living in her home with support from all of us and various agencies.
- My adult nephew moved in offering company and support. One night Mom forgot he was living there and phoned the RCMP to report someone in her basement. Three squad cars arrived with officers, guns drawn, shouting downstairs for the intruder to come out with his hands up. My nephew came out in his underwear to explain that he lived there. Mom never mentioned the incident, not even to apologize.

1997: Mom had a serious stroke and this time she almost died. She was moved into a care home.

- Although she lost her sense of time and space she was able to recognize us and she was delighted each time we visited.
- She forgot that she smoked or drank alcohol.

1999: Before we sold Mom's house we took her there for a last visit. She had no sense that she had lived there for over 40 years.

2000: Age 81: Mom died peacefully in her sleep.

- She didn't want a funeral so our extended family gathered on the banks of the Fraser River one rainy morning and scattered her ashes into the water. The sun came out and a rainbow appeared. A sturgeon swam by. After that we had a wonderful family meal together, sharing stories about our Mother/Nana.
- We arranged for a bench to be built beside the Fraser River near where we scattered Mom's ashes. The words on the bench say: "You are my sunshine."